

Wise Water Words

Hello, Fellow Gardeners.

What's In a Name?

This month I would like to take a small detour from my usual topic of water conservation and delve into botanical names of plants. This topic tends to be slightly intimidating since the names are in the Latin language. The reason Latin was selected as the language for the scientific naming system is because Latin is considered a 'dead' language and therefore new words, or slang words, will not be created.

This naming system was created in 1758 by Carl von Linne, who was a Swedish botanist (he eventually latinized his name to Carolus Linnaeus). Mr. Linnaeus noticed that there was some confusion with the names that existed for plants because there were several different names depending on who used them. He created the two-name system, called the bi-nomial (bi=two & nomial=name) nomenclature that we use today. The first part of the name is the genus, and the second half of the name is the specific epithet. Together, these two names make up the species. As you can imagine, there is also a very specific way to write these names. The genus is always capitalized, the specific epithet is not capitalized, and they are both italicized or underlined if italics are not possible. For example, the French marigold's botanical name is *Tagetes patula*.

Though this naming system sounds more confusing than using common names, it allows us to be more specific when discussing plants. You may have experienced another gardener referencing a particular plant that was unfamiliar to you, only to view the plant and realize you know it by another name. This is a very regular occurrence because common names are usually regional and will change according to the local language. The formal system of nomenclature can resolve these problems very well. Botanical names, also called scientific names, are used universally in all countries and in all languages. A gardener in Texas can mention *Salvia greggii* to a gardener in Frankfurt, Germany, and both gardeners know instantly which plant is being discussed.

You will sometimes see a third name after the specific epithet. This is just becoming even more specific and indicating a cultivated variety (cultivar) of a particular plant. This name is enclosed with single quotation marks with the first letter of the name capitalized but not italicized. For example, *Malus domestica* 'Granny Smith' is the botanical name for the very popular green apples people know as Granny Smith apples. I could go into this even further, but I think I will stop here for now, so I don't put anyone still reading to sleep.

The moral of this story is not to be intimidated using botanical names, but rather to embrace the chance to learn something new and brush up on your Latin!

Beatus plantationis!

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